

*Jefferson and Jesus: Why He Did What He Did*

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**by**

*Nicole Bruce*

**Thesis Advisor**

*Dr. Jason Powell*

**Ball State University  
Muncie, Indiana**

*April 2017*

**Expected Date of Graduation**

*May 2017*

Sp Coll  
Undergrad  
Thesis  
LD  
2489  
.Z4  
2017  
.B78

### Abstract

As one of the most well known figures in American history, Thomas Jefferson left behind a legacy full of accomplishments on a personal, state, and federal level. On his gravestone, he requested that he be remembered for three of those accomplishments: the writer of the Declaration of Independence, the writer of the *Virginia Statute for religious freedoms*, and the father of the University of Virginia. This choice highlights his unwavering commitment to liberty, and his actions point to firmly rooted beliefs in the natural rights of every person. By way of his public papers and private letters, I review Jefferson's beliefs on government, religion, and education, examining how those beliefs propelled him to change his state and his country through his chosen greatest accomplishments.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Jason Powell for advising me through the thesis process and helping me develop my ideas into a paper. His guidance and teaching shaped this project and my college career in ways for which I will be forever grateful.

I would like to thank my parents for encouraging my love of American history and my endless curiosity about the life, mind, and times of Thomas Jefferson.

I would like to thank Kristen, Jess, and Jordan for their willingness to listen as I formulated my ideas out loud before getting them onto paper, and for their encouragement throughout this process.

### Process Analysis

I have always loved the Revolutionary War era of American history. The only American Girl Doll I ever owned was Felicity, and I never took her out of her colonial outfit unless I was changing her into her Christmas dress that still fit the time period. Something about the idea of a group of states banding together to protect their freedoms captivated my attention at a young age, and my interest in the rest of American history pales in comparison to my interest with the founding of this nation that at times has probably bordered on obsession. As a child and teen I read many historical fiction novels about this time period and relished the social studies or history classes that covered the colonial and revolutionary era.

My fascination with Thomas Jefferson began the first time I read the Declaration of Independence, which most likely occurred during a social studies class in elementary or middle school. Its language captivates me like hardly any other writing can, and I am always stirred with patriotism as I read the final statements that declared the colonies to be free and independent states. I love the elevated language not found in modern textbooks or novels and the way it commands my attention and emotions. Aside from the style of the writing, the ideas and assertions contained in the Declaration ring so clearly in my mind as the ideal snapshot of all that America could be and all that the founders hoped they could create when they severed ties with the British Empire. The Declaration of Independence is my favorite historical document, and a large copy has hung over my bed ever since I bought it at the National Archives on my first trip to Washington D.C. four years ago.

Because reading was such a big part of my life, it naturally followed that the writer of my favorite historical document would attract my attention. As I began to learn more about Jefferson, primarily in my classes, I found that he was much more than the writer of the



Declaration of Independence. My impression of him grew as I realized he was not only a founding father; he was an ambassador to France, a Secretary of State, the Third President, the founder of the University of Virginia, and the mentor of the presidents that followed in his footsteps, just to hit the highlights. My history classes also taught me of the controversy surrounding Jefferson, with his manipulation of power and his actions that contradicted the lofty ideas about which he wrote with passion and zeal. My mental picture of him then grew to include the man who declared that all men were created equal but owned slaves his entire life and the man who championed a small federal government yet expanded its power by purchasing the Louisiana Territory from France and enacted an embargo that hurt many of the states he loved.

The summer before I began attending Ball State, my mother and I took a trip to Washington D.C. While I understood that many of the events that so fascinated me did not take place there, so many pieces of them were contained in that city that my interest was again ignited. I took in the original copy of the Declaration of Independence with my own eyes, tried to read what I could of the incredibly faded writing, and became irritated because of the years it had endured damage from the sun while hanging in the Treasury building. I stood under Jefferson's statue at his memorial, in awe of the grandeur of this testament to his impact on our country. I walked away from that trip with seven books, three of them about Jefferson. That collection of books about Jefferson, along with his writings, has now grown to somewhere near 20. While I have not read them all, I look forward to continuing to spend time studying more aspects of his character from them.

Taking the humanities sequence with Dr. Jason Powell during my first three semesters at Ball State taught me many things, but perhaps the greatest lesson I learned was to look critically

at my worldview, all that I had been taught, and any new information I took in. It became easier for me to see different sides of an argument, analyze them, and formulate my own opinion carefully yet studiously. This carried over into my reading on Jefferson and helped me uncover and understand the opinions and biases that influenced the authors of the books I read. I have found that because Jefferson contains an element of controversy and contradiction, most people have a strong opinion about him. Even if their opinion does not clearly come through in their writing, most will choose to focus on a certain aspect of Jefferson, and that chosen angle can reveal how they are trying to shape the reader's opinion of their subject.

When I began to contemplate writing my thesis, I had no clue what topic I wanted to pick. After speaking with my advisor, I decided not to complete the psychology honors thesis because I did not have a specific research interest that I wanted to study. I had also switched my major to psychology at the end of my sophomore year, so I did not feel as though I had a strong enough knowledge base to pick and pursue one area of the field. This gave me the ability to write my honors thesis about practically anything. While I did not know my topic, I knew I wanted my advisor to be Dr. Powell because of the influence he has had on my time at Ball State and the ways in which he has helped me grow as a person while in his classes. After getting his affirmative, I went to him with a list of things that I felt truly passionate about and incredibly interested in. Instead of giving me advice, Dr. Powell simply told me to go off of instinct, not hesitate, and asked me what topic I most wanted to write my thesis about. My immediate answer was Thomas Jefferson.

Even with my topic set, I still did not know how to begin selecting the theme of my paper. I already knew so much about Jefferson, but was still so curious about so many aspects of his character that I felt overwhelmed by the possibilities before me. Dr. Powell recommended



that I read *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* by Jon Meacham as a starting point because of the book's critical success. I had not yet read it, but had purchased it from the gift shop of the St. Louis Arch, and therefore began reading it when I got home for the summer before my senior year. I thought the book was expertly crafted; it gave me a good refresher about Jefferson's life and a solid foundation from which to determine my next steps. As I was reading the book, I kept coming back to the question "Why did he do that?" I became more and more curious about the motivation or the drive behind Jefferson's actions, especially because it seemed as though Jefferson genuinely desired a calm, agricultural life. In contrast, he spent much of his life actively participating in the governmental, social, religious, and educational issues of his day. From personal experience, I know that religious beliefs can be powerful motivators, especially when it comes to interacting with and influencing other people. Jefferson's religious beliefs seemed to be a combination of Deism and the moral code of Jesus of Nazareth, so I decided to see if these beliefs prompted his life that boasted so many accomplishments and so much influence on his time.

My father recommended the book that pointed me to many of the sources I ended up using in my thesis because the author had been interviewed on a podcast to which he subscribes. Kevin R.C. Gutzman's *Thomas Jefferson - Revolutionary: A Radical's Struggle to Remake America* covered Jefferson's beliefs and actions on the topics of government, religion, race, and education. The biggest motivating belief Jefferson held seemed to be the belief in the natural rights of people and their God-given equality. I obtained copies of his writings from the library and began reading his papers and letters on these topics, but still felt as though I had too broad a range of information and not enough structure to write a cohesive thesis. While flipping through Peterson's edition of Jefferson's writings, I came upon his epitaph, which detailed how Jefferson

desired his tombstone to be constructed. On it, he noted that he wished to be remembered for writing the Declaration of Independence, for writing *the Statute of Virginia for religious freedoms*, and for founding the University of Virginia. I decided to respect Jefferson's wishes by using those accomplishments he most wished to be remembered by as the main topics of my thesis.

I read as many of his letters and papers on government, religion, and education as I could in order to gain insight into his beliefs and how they directed his course of action. I made the conscious choice to leave the opinions of other authors out of my thesis because I felt that Jefferson made his views quite clear; even if he kept his beliefs from the public, he was sufficiently open about them with his friends. I made a list of all of the sources I wanted to use for each of the topics, and proceeded to pull quotes from each that I felt most demonstrated his beliefs and how he turned those into action. From these sources I was also able to pull sufficient descriptions of the situations that Jefferson wanted to change due to his beliefs. My outlines for each of the topics, therefore, followed a pattern of describing what the current system was like, what Jefferson said he believed about these topics, and how those beliefs translated into his achievements.

In writing my thesis, I struggled most with choosing which quotes to use and determining how to shorten them from the block quotes I pulled from his writings. His eloquence astounds me, and there were times when I felt as though I could never describe his life, beliefs, and actions anywhere near as well as he did. But over the course of writing my paper, I realized that the source material challenged me to become a better writer by more fully developing my writing style. I found that I could more easily stand by my writing when I fell into my own rhythm, rather than trying to focus on writing well enough to not have an obvious contrast between my



words and Jefferson's. In the end, I was proud of the way I took Jefferson at his word and connected it with his actions, something I think many people find difficult due to their choice to focus on the contradictions.

The process of writing this thesis feels like a culmination of years of interest and study about a man that has loomed large both in this nation's history and in my mind. His words have captivated me for years, and this paper feels like my chance to give back to him in a small way for all that he did for the United States of America. I learned that I enjoy studying history from primary sources much more than from a textbook because I could look directly at Jefferson's opinions rather than having to think critically about someone else's bias before examining them. I gained a deeper understanding of the way Jefferson saw the world, and it helped me see that while I like to think of him as a giant of almost mythical proportions, at the end of the day, Thomas Jefferson used the tools he had to build a world he could support and believe in.



Thomas Jefferson is known as one of the most influential statesman in American history. At a quick glance, Jefferson's imposing resume boasts credits such as the writer of the Declaration of Independence, governor of Virginia, first Secretary of State, third President of the United States, and the founder of the University of Virginia. Yet when it came to deciding what accomplishments he wanted immortalized on his tombstone, Jefferson chose author of the Declaration of Independence, *the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom*, and father of the University of Virginia. Forgoing recognition as a former governor, secretary of state, president, or even ambassador to France, Jefferson chose the three accomplishments that perhaps meant the most to him. While perhaps not those for which he was most known, these three testimonies of Jefferson's life are closely wrapped up in his core beliefs. As a man of the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason, Jefferson believed in the natural rights of every man that entitled him to power over his own freedom. I want to show that these beliefs extended to government, religion, and education, and that Jefferson wanted to make sure that the people of his beloved state of Virginia, and of the United States of America, lived in a place where they could experience these rights to their fullest extent.

First on the list of achievements for which Jefferson desired to be remembered was "Author of the Declaration of American Independence." This monumental document explained the natural rights of every man and the duty people had to protect their rights both individually and collectively, condemned King George III and the British Parliament for the long train of abuses against the colonies, and declared the colonies free of all ties and obligations to the British Crown. The Declaration of Independence was written in 1776 by Jefferson and polished by John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and the Continental Congress. Many of the ideas conveyed in it had been stewing in Jefferson's head for years. They can be found in his draft of the

Virginia Constitution, written during his time in Congress and sent to the general assembly, as they built the state government. His ideas are also enumerated in the document he sent to the First Continental Congress in 1774 when illness prevented him from attending. While deemed too radical for what the Congress was ready to pronounce, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* was nevertheless published and widely disseminated. It serves as a precursor to the Declaration, and as a longer pamphlet, it reveals many of Jefferson's beliefs on government.

The American colonies had been suffering under the overt oppression of the British Empire since the passing of Sugar Act in 1764, followed by continually escalating acts and taxes that encroached upon the financial and natural freedoms of the American people. While parliament, as the legislative body, took responsibility for much of this oppression, the colonists had agreed to be under the King, and so Jefferson directed his appeal to the King. He reminded Congress that "He is no more than the chief officer of the people, appointed by the laws, and circumscribed with definite powers, to assist in working the great machine of government, erected for their use, and consequently subject to their superintendence."<sup>1</sup> Jefferson believed that regardless of the structure of government, the people were still supreme, and government officials should be held accountable to the wishes of the people who uphold the laws that allow them to have a position of power. He understood that any submission to a sovereign meant a sacrifice of rights and personal interests to afford the protections and power of the sovereign, but because "history has informed us that bodies of men, as well as individuals, are susceptible of the spirit of tyranny," it was important that there were checks and balances in the government. The King had failed to perform his duties by using these checks on his parliament.

While the colonists settled in America as an extension of the British Empire under charters granted exclusively by the King, parliament did the most to oppress the American



colonists. The King refused to use his veto power against parliament, which in Jefferson's opinion allowed for "a deliberate and systematical plan of reducing us to slavery." The colonies would ask for relief from each new act had been levied against them; parliament would soften its taxation for a time, but would later retaliate with a heavier measure. Not only did parliament feel free to tax the colonies, it also dissolved colonial legislatures. To Jefferson, this took away the fundamental right of self-government. He asserts:

"One free and independent legislature hereby takes upon itself to suspend the powers of another, free and independent as itself; thus exhibiting a phenomenon unknown in nature, the creature and creature of its own power. Not only the principles of common sense, but the common feelings of human nature, must be surrendered up before his majesty's subjects here can be persuaded to believe that they hold their political existence at the will of a British parliament."

Because the colonies were so far away, parliament did not seem to fear any manner of forceful retaliation. They could not quickly riot or use force against their oppressors, so parliament saw no need to temper their treatment of the colonies. Jefferson believed that parliament's course of action, entirely unabated by the King and the British people, contradicted common sense. He called upon the King to mediate between the colonies and parliament, by using the established channels; he asked the current government to change the situation before the people had no choice but to act.

According to Jefferson, only the people could give government power, it could not decide what powers it possessed. In the case of parliament, "When they have assumed to themselves powers which the people never put into their hands, then indeed their continuing in office becomes dangerous to the state, and calls for an exercise of the power of dissolution." Jefferson



clarified that people derive natural rights from their inherent human nature and from their creator, not from their government, and that the colonists simply asserted these rights and did what they could to protect them due to the King's inattention to their pleas. The colonists knew the difference between right and wrong, and they knew what inequality looked like. They only asked that their rights be protected and respected. Jefferson ends his pamphlet of opinion and suggestions to Congress by foreshadowing his writings two years later: "The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time; the hand of force may destroy, but cannot disjoin them."

While *Summary View* was published widely in both the colonies and in Europe, it affected none of the changes Jefferson believed needed to happen if the people were to see their natural rights to life and liberty, given to them by God, upheld and protected. And so in 1776, he again took up his pen to fight against the government that had ignored the reasonable pleas of the colonists and had instead continued to oppress them. This time, however, the document did not merely call on the King to utilize his power to check his legislature. The colonists had suffered long enough under the abuses of the government of Great Britain, and they declared their independence, by which they could erect their own government and protect their rights as they saw fit.

Jefferson begins the Declaration of Independence by declaring the reasons that the colonies have decided to separate from Great Britain, and among the first are the natural rights that he believed every man possesses: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, & the pursuit of happiness."<sup>2</sup> He goes on to directly connect these with government in the manner he believed was correct: "that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." He asserts

that governments should not be changed lightly, but when it becomes clear that change needs to occur, it is not only the right, but the duty of the people to do away with the current government and erect a new one that they believe will best promote and protect their natural rights, safety, and happiness. For Jefferson, government is made to protect the rights of the people, especially those rights that they choose to give up for protection. Allowing a government to have power over a people involves a sacrifice, so constitutions or laws are put in place to determine what the people have agreed to sacrifice to afford the protection and oversight of a governing body. The government of Great Britain had long been governing outside of the limits of its power, and the American colonies united and declared "these united colonies are & of right ought to be free & independent states; that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British crown." In drafting this historic document on the rights of all mankind and the actions the Americans were willing to take to protect them, Jefferson fought for his beliefs of equality and the right to liberty in the face of a government that had torn them down.

As Congress continued to work out the scope of the powers of the newly created American government, Jefferson continued to fight for the rights of the people to govern themselves and to be protected from a group of people who had the capacity to encroach upon the freedom they had just fought so hard to defend. Although he was in France at the time of the Constitution's writing, debates, and ratification, he made clear his thoughts on the document to James Madison. Among his chief problems was the lack of a bill of rights, for "a bill of rights is what the people are entitled to against every government on earth, general or particular, & what no government should refuse, or rest on inferences."<sup>3</sup> The American people knew what it was to be under a government without a bill of rights that protected them against the natural tendency of power towards tyranny, and Jefferson fought to make sure that they would never again have the



same experience. They had won their freedom and were able to build a government based in the power of the people to choose who governed them and how they governed, and throughout his political career Jefferson did what he could to make sure this was true.

Listed after “Author of the Declaration of American Independence” on Thomas Jefferson’s plans for the inscription on his tombstone is “of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom.” After being known for authoring the document that started the new United States on the path towards securing freedom from governmental tyranny, Jefferson desired to be remembered as a champion for securing religious freedom from the oppression of the established church. The act that carried his legacy of work on religious freedom, however, was his response to a letter from the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut. He assured the persecuted minority group,

“Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ thus building a wall of separation between Church & State.”<sup>4</sup>

Jefferson intended to assure the Baptists that during his time as President, he would work to secure the freedom to worship as each individual pleased, without governmental demands to adhere to a specific set of beliefs or to support a state church. While he could not secure freedom from social separation, he could adhere to and carry out his beliefs that government only has the power given it by the people, and the power over religious beliefs or practices was never



enumerated. This determination to provide religious freedom grew not only out of Jefferson's personal religious beliefs, but also as an extension of his beliefs in the natural rights of man and his experiences with an oppressive church backed by an oppressive government.

According to Jefferson's *Autobiography*, the Church of England was second in power only to the British government. The charter of Virginia given to Sir Walter Raleigh "contained an express Proviso that their laws 'should not be against the true Christian faith, now professed in the Church of England.'"<sup>5</sup> This proviso provided the Church with enormous power due to its ability to override laws it determined went against its specific interests. Additionally, the charter of Virginia divided the colony into parishes, each given a minister of the Church. Every colonist, member or not, paid a tax to support the Church, and aside from the financial burden, high religious intolerance abounded for groups such as the Quakers or Presbyterians that attempted to establish themselves in Virginia. Jefferson writes that although a majority of the colonists in Virginia eventually dissented as the Revolution drew closer, many of the legislators were churchmen, and therefore upheld laws taxing colonists to provide for the salaries of the Pastors and to protect the church's power over the people.

By 1776, Jefferson and the Virginia General Assembly were able to make up some ground in disestablishing the Church of England by decriminalizing holding religious opinions other than those of loyalty to the Church of England, choosing not to attend religious services, and worshipping in a mode other than that chosen by the Church. They were also able to exempt dissenters from forcibly financially supporting the Church through taxation, and to stop giving the clergy salaries from the state. Yet even with these steps towards religious tolerance, common law still declared that heresy against the Christian faith was punishable by inability to hold any religious, civil, or military office, 3 years imprisonment, and inability to hold custody or

guardianship of minors, including children. In Jefferson's mind, conditions such as these described "religious slavery, under which a people have been willing to remain, who have lavished their lives and fortunes for the establishment of their civil freedom."<sup>6</sup>

For Jefferson, the influence of the Church of England on the state of Virginia, especially after the Revolution, was unbelievable. It went against common sense because the Church was not an elected body, and therefore not entitled to have any influence on the laws governing the people of Virginia. The people never chose to give up any power related to their rights to practice their religion or worship freely, and the Church did not protect any such rights. Jefferson not only saw a problem with the way religious minorities were oppressed by these laws and infringements on their freedoms, but shared in their sufferings due to his dissenting beliefs.

When answering a query about the religions present in Virginia for a foreign statesman, Jefferson wrote, "our rulers can have authority over such natural rights only as we have submitted to them. The rights of conscience we never submitted, we could not submit. We are answerable for them to our God." To Jefferson, it never made sense for the government to be making laws concerning religious beliefs because they were purely between a man and his God. He understood that laws could not change minds, opinions, or moral reasoning, and therefore could only oppress the people who dissented from the established religion. He believed instead that each individual should use reason and inquiry to test everything and believe what stands the test, for "reason and free inquiry are the only effectual agents against error." This was Jefferson's own practice in determining the religion he believed, and while he was not publicly open about his religious beliefs, he made himself clear to his correspondents.

Jefferson rejected the established church, as well as many of the practices of the Christian faith at the time. However, as he informed Benjamin Rush, he was not opposed "to the genuine



precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian, in the only sense he ever wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to himself every human excellence; & believing he never claimed any others.”<sup>7</sup> He believed that Jesus’ moral doctrines were the most pure set to be found anywhere, and lauded Jesus for correcting the Jewish religion by giving them a more just notion of God’s character and by making religion about much more than actions. Jefferson believed Jesus pulled religion inward and dealt with the motives and thoughts of man rather than simply wanting to correct behavior. The benevolence of Jesus stood the test of Jefferson’s reason, and he adopted them as his moral compass. The dogma of those like Calvin, who preached that God could not be understood and that blind faith was necessary to be a Christian, did not stand up to Jefferson’s reason. Accepting a revelation in order to believe in God was not reasonable for Jefferson, who did not think revelation was necessary. Jefferson believed there was a God without having to let go of the need for proof; in his mind, there was beyond ample proof of a creator and a supreme being that directed the world in which he lived. The idea that to be a Christian one has to let go of the need for proof that a God exists lends credit to Atheism because it is easier to just write off the idea of revelation and say there is no proof rather than seeing, as Jefferson did, that for the world to run the way it does, something or someone has to be in charge. This belief made it unnecessary to hold to the creeds or points that Calvin or others preached.

Jefferson believed that Jesus wasn’t asking individuals to give him a creed or a confession of faith in the words that other people spoke about him; Jefferson posited that Jesus asked them to change the way they live their lives because of the way His morals changed their hearts. It was not anything to do with a belief in Christ’s deity or His salvation that was offered to everyone - Jefferson held solely to the words that were spoken by Christ alone, not by his



followers that wrote about him so many years later from memory. He believed that as time went by, fallible men decided to make more codes and creeds about what individuals had to believe before they could attain salvation rather than focusing on how Jesus said Jefferson's life should look if he truly followed him. For Jefferson, following the morals and teachings of Jesus were enough - he did not think that he had to subscribe to the teachings of men that gave Jesus qualities Jefferson felt Jesus never claimed to have. He believed Jesus was the purest, kindest, most moral man that ever lived, and that he gave us the best system of morals ever presented because they not only spread love and good treatment to everyone, regardless of their beliefs, but he made it about the heart and mind behind the actions, not just a set of laws to be followed to avoid punishment. Jefferson saw men like Calvin as people who "perverted them for the structure of a system of fancy absolutely incomprehensible, and without any foundation in his genuine words."<sup>8</sup> In Jefferson's mind, he should be able to put everything up against reason and decide for himself what stood the test and what was pure nonsense. He decided that the morals of Jesus were practically perfect and worthy of following to the letter throughout his life; he rejected the mysticism of faith that Calvin and other dogmatists espoused as the way to truly follow Jesus and to be right with God so as to avoid eternal punishment and gain eternal favor.

Today, Jefferson is classified as a Deist. According to the Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Deists believe that true religion is an expression of human nature, whose essence is reason.<sup>9</sup> They tend to stay away from dogmatism, implicit faith, and the mysterious, and instead lean on freedom of thought, toleration, and the natural reason of man. They affirm the individual's right to think for himself on all subjects, including religion, and to freely communicate those thoughts to others.

Believing what he did about the natural rights of man to practice religion freely, Jefferson eagerly took on the challenge of writing a bill establishing religious freedoms when he worked on the monumental task of revising Virginia's laws for the general assembly during the Revolution. After officially separating from England and adopting its own state constitution, Virginia decided to appoint a committee to go through all of the existing laws and revise them as necessary. Jefferson, his mentor George Wythe, and Edmund Pendleton were the final members chosen to complete this task. While Jefferson maintains that he had the idea for this bill, and even a draft of it, in 1777, it was not brought to the assembly until 1779. James Madison presided over the final passing of the bill, which occurred in 1786 when Jefferson was ambassador to France. Heavy deletion occurred to the preamble of the bill and minor revisions to some words throughout. Madison put in much work to make sure that the bill was passed despite the arguments over the wordings.<sup>10</sup>

The Act for establishing religious Freedom asserts that if the perfect author of religion, Almighty God, chose not to coerce humanity into believing in a set of religious tenets or observing certain religious practices, fallible human beings and governments could never presume they have the power to attempt to control the religious beliefs and practices of the people under their domain.<sup>11</sup> It establishes religious freedom as a natural right that cannot and should not be tampered with, and abolishes any manner of taxation to support an established religion or persecution due to profession of dissenting religious beliefs or unorthodox worship practices. After years of control from an unelected body that demanded adherence to precepts which cannot be changed by mandate, the people of Virginia were free from the possibility of the government trespassing on their natural right to do what they pleased with regards to religion.



Jefferson continued to fight for religious freedom for every American after securing it for the citizens of his state. As President, he assured a religious minority still under the control of an oppressive state-sponsored religion that religion was between a man and his God, and that when the people of America decided that their government should not infringe on their religious freedom, they built a wall protecting the people from the power a church could have when it could influence the government. His ideas extended to providing an alternative to education, a social good over which the church had previously held much power. As a result, his final achievement for which he wished to be remembered, father of the University of Virginia, was an extension of his belief in republican government and in the right to religious freedom.

To Jefferson, education was crucial to ensuring the continuation of the republican government that he had fought so hard to establish and defend, both from the British Empire and the Federalists who preferred a bigger, more monarchical central government. He admitted to a correspondent, "convinced that the people are the only safe depositories of their own liberty, and that they are not safe unless enlightened to a certain degree, I have looked on our present state of liberty as a short-lived possession, unless the mass of the people could be informed to a certain degree."<sup>12</sup> With this belief in mind, Jefferson worked to reform education from the ground up in Virginia, culminating in the establishment of his University.

Jefferson saw many problems with the state of education in Virginia.<sup>6</sup> While some states in New England had public primary schools, education in Virginia still very much held to the idea of "every man for himself." The wealthy provided their children with tutors when they were young, and then sent them to grammar school to learn a broader range of subjects. Those who were able then sent their children to college to follow a general course of study. In Virginia, the only option was William and Mary, an establishment of the Church of England that required



its professors to subscribe to its articles and its students to learn its Catechism. This conflicted with Jefferson's view of the church's place in the state and his view of religious freedom. Making students learn a catechism goes beyond free inquiry and falls more on the side of indoctrination, something Jefferson could not stand for. Few outside the wealthy were educated enough to understand what was happening in their country or even the world around them. Literacy rates were low among the masses and many knew only what they needed to know to get by in their trade.

The problem with the educational system that loomed largest in Jefferson's mind was the sheer lack of opportunity for the majority of the citizens of Virginia. The government of both the state and the country rested on the voters choosing who should be entrusted to protect their rights and best interests, and many were not educated enough to understand what rights they had. This worried Jefferson because he thought, "in every government on earth is some trace of human weakness, some germ of corruption and degeneracy, which cunning will discover, and wickedness insensibly open, cultivate, and improve. Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves therefore are its only safe depositories." He was well aware of what could happen very quickly if government was left in the hands of an elitist few. He had seen the federalists take on more power than he thought the Constitution provided to the government during the Washington administration, and then watched them grab enormous amounts of power and status during the Adams administration with the Alien and Sedition Acts, and had staged the "Revolution of 1800" to return the liberties protected by the Constitution to the people.<sup>13</sup> He firmly believed that a continued republican government would only be safe if the masses of citizens were willing to defend their personal liberties. They could not do this, however, if they did not even understand what their liberties were, how the

Constitution protected them, and what it would mean for any level of government to be overstepping the boundaries laid out in the Constitution. He believed that education would preserve the government. As he wrote to Uriah Forrest,

“Say, finally, whether peace is best preserved by giving energy to the government, or information to the people. This last is the most certain, and the most legitimate engine of government. Educate and inform the whole mass of the people. Enable them to see that it is their interest to preserve peace and order, and they will preserve them. And it requires no very high degree of education to convince them of this. They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty.”<sup>14</sup>

The current system also allowed the government to be solely in the hands of the wealthy because they were the only ones who were educated enough to understand what was happening and, therefore, who could perform the duties expected of government agents. Jefferson believed in the idea of a “natural aristocracy,” whereby the people in power should be those who were of the highest caliber of mind and virtue, not of pocketbook.<sup>15</sup> There was no way to know who these people were, however, without giving them a chance to prove that they were on the same level as children from wealthy families. If they proved to be bright early on, there was a possibility that continued education, not withheld from them due to a lack of financial means, could propel them towards higher roles in the government and society that would allow them to protect their fellow citizens within the confines of the government that the states had approved. It was not even that it was necessary that every person should be able to hold public office in order for individual liberties to be protected, it was that the job of protecting liberties should be entrusted to the best options from all of the people, not just the ones who had enough money to have access to the resources to get them in positions of power. The wealthy will act in the



interests of the wealthy, which does not help the masses of people who cannot be counted in this group. The government must be comprised of a cross-section of all the people for the government to effectively protect and look out for the interests of all the people.

Finally, the only option for collegiate education in the state of Virginia, William and Mary, was under the control of the Anglican Church, which did not promote religious freedom, toleration, or free inquiry. Jefferson believed that while teaching was fine, indoctrination encroached on the rights of students. And as previously shown, the Anglican Church had too much power in England and was too connected to the government to be trusted; Jefferson did not want the same thing occurring in America. Not only this, but not everyone in America was Anglican, and if the naturally intelligent and virtuous were to be educated at William and Mary, they should not have to worry about their beliefs being challenged or being persuaded to change just because of the way the school was set up before America was independent. The country had decided to uphold freedom of religion as a virtue of utmost importance, and, therefore, Jefferson hoped to modernize and secularize the educational curriculum to ensure more sciences and history were taught.

Before establishing the University of Virginia, Jefferson introduced a bill to the Virginia General Assembly that would have radically changed the educational system from top to bottom. It was titled "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," and of it Jefferson wrote, "I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised, for the preservation of freedom and happiness."<sup>16</sup> What made this bill so foundational to Jefferson's conception of the law in Virginia is that it would have provided free education at a primary level for every free child, regardless of the parents' ability to pay for the education. The land was to be divided into

districts, and each district would have a school that would teach children reading, writing, and common arithmetic while also making the children familiar with Greek, Roman, English, and American history. Education would be provided freely for three years, after which children could continue to attend if someone paid for it. For those who could not pay, the brightest boy from each of the primary schools would be sent to grammar school at the expense of the state, to further Jefferson's idea of the natural aristocracy. He wrote that in doing this, "we hope to avail the state of those talents which nature has sown as liberally among the poor as the rich, but which perish without use, if not sought for and cultivated."<sup>6</sup> The brightest state-funded students from the grammar schools would then be funded for 3 years at William and Mary.

Jefferson proposed this method because he wanted to catch the best and brightest minds regardless of their social or economic status, but he knew that he would face pushback from the legislature and the people of funding education from the state budget. He also did not think it was necessary for every person to have an equally high level of education. Instead, he deemed necessary "such a degree of learning given to every member of the society as will enable him to read, to judge & to vote understandingly on what is passing."<sup>12</sup> He truly believed that everyone should know their rights and understand the proceedings of government, and he thought that reading, writing, and arithmetic, taught through the lens of history, would be most effective. He emphasized history because "history by apprising them of the past will enable them to judge of the future." Government could not protect the people from government, and the wealthy could not protect the poor from the interests of the wealthy. Therefore, it was necessary for all to have a basic understanding of their rights and the capacity under which their government could operate.



The final stage of Jefferson's plan involved founding the University of Virginia. The school was established as the first secular university in the nation, which had many colleges in Virginia and other states, but there was no secular university. He envisioned a university where many subjects would be offered to students by the highest caliber faculty available, a place "to form the statesmen, legislators, and judges, on whom public prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend."<sup>17</sup> The modern and ancient languages, mathematics, a wide array of sciences, and all facets of government were to be taught. In addition, the visitors, or in today's terms, the board of directors, gave religious professors the option to hold their classes within a free space in the university, but did not hire any religious professors or require students to take any religious courses. This was done because to the committee felt the Constitution was clear that all sects were to be on equal footing, so they could not give preference by hiring anyone.

Jefferson believed in democracy and the principles of a republican government so fiercely that he was willing to fight his entire adult life to get the people the tools they needed to protect their liberties. Unlike the federalists who feared the people and their ignorance, Jefferson believed that everyone should be given a chance to prove themselves worthy of holding office, protecting the liberties of the masses, and guiding the new nation. He believed that the surest way to keep liberty safe was to educate everyone, and he attempted this feat through introducing bills that would provide for the primary education of every free child in the state of Virginia. He spread his views on the best means of education, and spent his retired life founding and supporting the University of Virginia, which to this day stands as a proud testament to his hard work and perseverance in giving the people of Virginia the best chance to know how to protect the liberties guaranteed to them by the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of Virginia.

Thomas Jefferson wished to be remembered simply as “Author of the Declaration of American Independence of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom & Father of the University of Virginia.”<sup>18</sup> While separately standing as magnificent achievements, together they paint a picture of a great statesman who passionately believed in the natural rights given to every man by his Creator and was willing to fight for every individual to be given the chance to experience them. He stood up to tyrants because he believed that the people are the source of the power of government, and without the consent of the people the government cannot exercise control over their rights. His belief that religion is between man and his God, and cannot be coerced or even touched by government, fueled his work to tear down the established state religion of the Church of England in Virginia. To protect the liberties of the people from a government that could attempt to grab at more power than the Constitution granted it, he fought to educate the people of his state, because he believed that only the people could protect themselves from government’s natural tendency toward tyranny. Jefferson was a man driven by his deep conviction of the equality of all, and he spent his life working to make this conviction a reality.



## Endnotes

- 1: "A Summary View of the Rights of British America," *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 105-122.
- 2: "The Declaration of Independence," *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 19-24.
- 3: TJ to James Madison, December 20, 1787, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 914-918.
- 4: TJ to Messrs. Nehemiah Dodge and Others, a Committee of the Danbury Baptist Association, in the State of Connecticut, January 1, 1802, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 510.
- 5: "Autobiography," *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 3-101.
- 6: "Notes on the State of Virginia," *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 127-325
- 7: TJ to Dr. Benjamin Rush, April 21, 1803, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 1122-1126
- 8: TJ to John Adams, April 11, 1823, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 1466-1469
- 9: "Deism," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Cromwell Collier and Macmillan Inc., 1967), 326-331.
- 10: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950- ) 2:547-553
- 11: "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom," *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 545-547.
- 12: TJ to Littleton Waller Tazewell, January 5, 1805, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 1149-1153.
- 13: TJ to John Dickinson, March 6, 1801, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 1084-1085
- 14: TJ to Urriah Forrest, December 31, 1787, Founders Online (National Archives), <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=%20Author%3A%22Jefferson%2C%20Thomas%22&s=1111311111&r=2&sr=Forrest>

15: "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 2:526-533.

16: TJ to George Wythe, August 13, 1786, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 857-859.

17: "Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia," August 4, 1818, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*: 457-473.

18: "Epitaph," *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 707.